

RESEARCH ARTICLE



ISSN

INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA

2395-2636 (Print); 2321-3108 (online)

ECOFEMINISM IN T. C. BOYLE'S NOVEL *WHEN THE KILLING'S DONE*

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Doi: <https://doi.org/10.33329/rjelal.7219.300>



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ABSTRACT

The research paper attempts to explore the novel *When the Killing's Done* (2011) from the perspective of ecofeminism. Ecofeminism finds the interconnection between exploitation and degradation of the natural world and the subordination and oppression of women. The research paper explores that self-interested, male-centric human actions to save nature are deceptive. Such actions only aggravate the situation of nature and women and cast them as 'othered'. The research scholar uses the concepts like 'Self and other Dualism', 'Object Relation Theory' and 'Ethical decisions' to establish the interconnection between the oppression of women and degradation of nature.

Keywords: Ecofeminism, feminism, self, other, nature, culture, the California Channel Islands, the Santa Cruz Island, ecosystem, ecocriticism

Ecofeminism is an activist movement that came into existence in the mid-1970s seeing that there is a connection between the oppression of women and dominion over nature. 'French feminist Françoise d'Eaubonne for the first coined the term Ecofeminism in her book *Le Féminisme ou la Mort* (1974) to describe the large-scale violence inflicted on women and nature as a result of male domination' (Rangarajan 110). Ecofeminism applies a feminist approach to understand ecology bringing together the elements of feminist theory and ecocriticism. Ecocriticism is a study of literature and the physical world around it. It considers that literature is the byproduct of culture. Therefore, analyzing literary text from the perspective of ecocritical theory provides scope to understand the complex relationship between humans and nature. It helps to understand human beings perception and treatment to the non-human world in every age. Ecocritics believe that anthropocentric ideas of placing humans at the center as an authority are

responsible for the degradation of nature. These ideas have been so deeply rooted in the human culture that the humans consider everything found in the nature as property. Aldo Leopold in his book *A Sand Country Almanac* (1949) explains that 'humans exploit water, plants, animals and soil because they consider them to be 'property', like Odysseus's slave girls - the relationship is one of privilege, not respect. (Rangarajan 51)' Marry Mellor in her book *Feminism and Ecology* (1997) argues that there is 'connection between exploitation and degradation of the natural world and the subordination and oppression of women'. Françoise d'Eaubonne in her book *Le Féminisme ou la Mort* (1974) relates the oppression and domination of all marginalized groups (women, people of colour, children, poor) to the oppression and domination of nature (animals, land, water, air, etc.). She further argues that oppression, domination, exploitation and colonization from the Western patriarchal society

have directly caused irreversible environmental damage.

Ecofeminism is a pluralistic movement and embraces a number of causes. Greta Gaard succinctly defines it as a movement that 'calls for an end to all oppression, arguing that no attempt to liberate women (or any other oppressed group) will be successful without an equal attempt to liberate nature' (Rangarajan 112).

T. C. Boyle is one of the prolific and best seller American authors. He writes short stories and novels on environmental themes. Most of his novels have real incidences as a backdrop to its story. He fictionalizes these reality-based incidences to depict the grave environmental crisis. His *When the Killing's Done* (2011) is a powerful novel that questions the attempts of human being to protect environment. The backdrop of the story is the attempt of the American Government to eradicate invasive animals and plants from the Channel Islands Anacapa and the Santa Cruz Islands. The National Park Service and The Nature Conservancy successfully completed these two animal eradication programs. The intention behind the execution of these programs was to exterminate invasive animals like black rats, snakes, feral sheep's, pigs and golden eagles from the islands to save the indigenous animals like fox, birds like bald eagles and unique flora and fauna that is only available on these islands.

Boyle satirizes the way these missions were executed. He satirizes the American Government, scientists and the committees of The National Park Service and The Nature Conservancy departments through the character of Alma Boyd Takesue and her team members. Alma's character represents the scientific view of the extermination of invasive species, whereas Dave LaJoy, the second protagonist of the novel represents a spiritual or emotional way of preserving nature. Boyle uses humour, irony and satire to criticize both the ways that interfere in nature's continuously evolving ecosystem. Boyle puts into the question the self-consideration of protagonists as an authority or duty to save the animals or kill one kind of animal to save other kinds of animals. Boyle uses the eco-feministic perspective

and questions the anthropocentric attitude. He satirizes human-centric ideology that exploits or controls nature as a weaker section underestimating that she cannot work on herself to take her own care.

Greta Gaard and Lori Gruen in their essay *Ecofeminism* (1993) argue that eco-feminists, such as Carolyn Merchant, see the separation of culture from nature as a product of scientific revolution. Science works in experimentation, analyses to understand things through reason. The scientific project carried out by the American Government to kill one species of animal over another was also an experiment where the poisonous bait pellets with brodifacoum were used to kill the black rats. Rats were expected to die in a week after eating that pellet. Ecofeminism believes that such acts are only done with the perception of nature as 'something dead, inert or mechanistic' and it shows that 'domination of or oppression of nature was not considered to be unethical, but rather a judicious use of resources. (Greta Gaard and Lori Gruen 236-37)

The vital concern of ecofeminism is that the ideology of 'Self and Other Dualism' is the byproduct of patriarchal values that provides the privilege to the self and undervalues the other. 'The dualism of self/other are manifested as culture/nature, man/woman, white/non-white, human/non-human animal, civilized/wild, heterosexual/homosexual, reason/emotion, wealthy/poor, etc. (Greta Gaard and Lori Gruen 237). Patriarchal values devalue women and nature as 'Other' and exploit them for their 'Self' progress. This separation of Self and Other separates human culture from nature.

The Nature Conservancy planned action of restoring the Santa Cruz Island. They killed over 5000 feral pigs to restore the population of native fox species and bald eagles. Another plan was to provide 'enjoyment, education, and inspiration of this for the future generation' (NPS). The act of mass killing suggests the separation of culture from nature where Self-interest and hubris dominate the Other.

Scientific experimentation on animals in the name of development and progress, according to

ecofeminism, is an act of domination of humans over non-human species. Boyle depicts the picture of human cruelty over animals as:

'Then there were animal experiments – kittens having their eyes sewed shut to study the effect of sightlessness on development; rabbits subjected to the Drazie test, in which a chemical irritant is dripped into their eyes by way of evaluating products in the cosmetic industry; dogs injected with plutonium; monkeys deprived in every conceivable way, tortured, mutilated; rats uncountable bred only to suffer and die, transgenic rats, oncogenic rats, rats upon rats' (Boyle 130-131).

Boyle also approaches to the idea of meat eating and cruelty enforced on the animals through the perspective of ecofeminism. Both Alma Takesue and Dave LaJoy do not eat non-vegetarian food understanding the kind of torture, suffering and pain that animals have to go through to satisfy the human hunger. Boyle describes how hens are 'subjected to molting' and kept away from the food for forcing ovulation, after a year are slaughtered (Boyle131). He then goes on depicting how billions of chickens are slaughtered, millions of hogs and cows are skinned alive (Boyle 130). 'Environmental theories concentrate on holistic, biocentric analyses and thus reject vegetarianism as a choice that removes human beings from the workings of nature'(Greta Gaard and Lori Gruen 249). But, they object the way 'the animals are domesticated and manipulated through breeding and biotechnological interventions, and ultimately reduced to food producing units' (Greta Gaard and Lori Gruen 249).

Ecofeminists argue that privileging Self over Other also causes the rise of capitalism, feudalism and colonialist practices. Such practices, Vandana Shiva argues, lead to 'systematic underdevelopment' (Greta Gaard and Lori Gruen 239). Boyle depicts how the land of the Santa Cruz Island was used for capitalistic purposes initially which systematically went on destroying the flora and fauna on the island. Boyle describes, in the novel, how the Mexican Government published the

advertisement for selling the island in 'Daily Alta California' on May 25, 1858, as:

'FOR SALE: As island containing around 60,000 acres of land, well-watered, and abounding in small valleys of the best pasturage of sheep. There are no wild animals on it that would interfere with livestock. There is good harbor and safe anchorage.' (Boyle 166)

The island was sold to a consortium headed by Eustace Barron. Considering the pro-environment for the pasturage of sheep, sheep were introduced on the island. Within ten years there were as many as fifty thousand sheep. Overgrazing affected the land adversely resulting in drying up of water sources, soil degradation, the decline of unique flora and fauna on the islands. Later cows were also introduced. The winery was established. Eventually, islands suffered through tremendous stress. The business of exporting lambs, beef, wool, hides, allow wine back to the coast was in full bloom. The water sources were dried up. Soil degradation took place. Unique plants were destroyed. Ecofeminists believe that 'livestock production is a major cause of desertification, as more and more forests are cleared to provide rangeland for cattle' (Greta Gaard and Lori Gruen 242).

The metaphoric use of language also plays an important role in the subordination of nature and women. Boyle describes the Santa Cruz Island was as 'virgin range without any predators' (Boyle 169). It has been found that human beings establish their culture at places easily where they find less environmental obstacles. Land without predators has been considered as the best situation to establish wealth accumulation sources. Boyle intends to convey that the seller and buyer of the land considered the land without predator as property and weaker part of nature, therefore, useful for extensive exploitation. He also describes how women's dignity is destroyed using derogatory animalistic names. The hunters, in the novel, call Rita 'bitch' when she had an argument on hunting of seventy-three lambs on the islands. (Boyle184). Ecofeminists draw a perception that the act of hunting is an act of male dominance and is a result

of considering nature as 'Other'. On the other hand, women representing emotional side preserve and nurture the nature that is represented by Boyle through the characters like Rita and Anise.

Boyle describes how capitalistic ideas exploit nature and women in the novel. Rita, who was separated from her husband Toby, was appointed as a cook by Baxter Russel. During their first meeting about the work, Rita asks Baxter Russel 'What are you paying?' Baxter replies very casually as 'Does it really matter?' When Rita assertively says that it matters, he tells her that she will get minimum wages and enough food for her and her daughter Anise. The incidence proves the theory of colonization where men are employed for cash and woman for completing the household duties like providing food for the family (Greta Gaard and Lori Gruen 239).

Another concern for ecofeminists is a problem of overpopulation that results in overburdening on natural resources. Boyle raises the question of overpopulation in the novel through the character Alma who thinks 'Seven billion by 2011, seven billion and counting. And where are we going to put them all?' (Boyle 39) Alma is a committed environmentalist who never uses the shower more than five minutes thinking that water is precious when most of the world is suffering from a drought-like situation. Her boyfriend Tim also supports her in this view of 'saving the ecosystem, preserving what's left, restoring it'(Boyle 283). They believe that 'to bring a child into an overpopulated world is irresponsible, wrong, nothing less than sabotage...' (Boyle 283).

Ecofeminism demands the rights to a woman in her 'reproductive health (freedom from compulsory motherhood, freedom to choose motherhood and to regulate it). Alma, despite taking the utmost care of using contraceptives, gets pregnant from her boyfriend Tim. Though she didn't want to give birth to any child before getting pregnant, she now feels emotional and decides to give birth to the child. When she informs her boyfriend Tim that she is pregnant, he gets disappointed and asks her to abort the child. When she denies for abortion, Tim deserts her breaking all

his 'commitment, love, support, empathy – friendship' (Boyle 292). Tim's behavior represents that patriarchal dominion over motherhood of woman. Tim's complete detachment from Alma after her pregnancy fits into Nancy Chodorow's feminist psychoanalytic theory of 'object relation theory' (Greta Gaard and Lori Gruen 238). Tim follows 'denial of connection', 'abstraction' or 'separation' that are masculine identifications whereas Alma's emotional connection with the child as well as a strong urge to get united with Tim again embodies her 'sense of continuity', 'self-in-representation' or 'connectedness' that are feminine identities.

Carol Gilligan, a female psychoanalyst, argues that men take 'ethical decisions' on the basis of an appeal to abstract rules whereas women take a decision only within the specific context considering its effect on overall society (Greta Gaard and Lori Gruen 238). Alma, scientist and project coordinator, takes the decision of extermination of invasive animals proving her point of view to the committee members and the court. Court grants her permission on the ethical ground that the project will help for the restoration of native animals, birds and plants which is unique on the islands. Dave LaJoy, an environmental activist, decides to save the animals from getting killed through Alma's project. He attempts to sabotage the mission. He did not have any perfect plan to save the animals. His unplanned actions result in the drowning of a young female student who was in his team in the act of sabotaging the mission of Alma. Some of his acts seem egocentric and based on abstract rules. When he finds that Alma is successful in her mission, he leaves raccoons and rattle snakes on the island as invasive species only to create problems for Alma and her team in the future. This act displays a male-centric egoistic attitude where Dave disconnects himself from his own environmental ethic and without caring about the results of his action, takes an irrational decision and goes astray from his mission of saving the animals and preservation of nature.

Women's connectedness to nature and their emotional response to destructive actions or plans of the humans to interfere in the ecosystem

are very aptly depicted by Boyle through the character of Alicia who says: 'I don't know why we have to kill everything...what if we just left everything along like the world was before us – like God made it. Wouldn't that be easier?' (Boyle 103) Alicia's feelings can be compared to women's sense of attachment and unity with nature.

Thus, T. C. Boyle strongly tries to establish the connection between the oppression of women with the exploitation of nature through his novel *When the Killing's is Done*. Taking the realistic incidence as a backdrop to the story, he highlights how Self / Other dualism separates human culture from nature. The exploitation of female and destruction of nature are the results of placing men and humans at the center or at the dominant position considering them as 'Self'. It can be concluded that the author exposes the duplicity of human actions to preserve and safeguard the interest of nature and women. The novel gives a message that these actions are deceptive as they are self-interested, and self-interested actions can only aggravate the situation of nature and women.

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